



Bloembergen Marieke, *De geschiedenis van de politie in Nederlands-Indië. Uit zorg en angst*

Amsterdam (Boom), Leiden (KITLV), 2009, 408 pp., ISBN 978 9085 067078.

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- 1 This history of the police in Colonial Indonesia is presented as the first in a series of two that follows on – but is separate from – the five-volume history of the Dutch police (2007) that resulted from a project led by Cyrille Fijnaut (see the discussion dossier in *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 123, 3, 2008. The other volume of the present series, as indicated in Fijnaut's book, will be written by Elsbeth Locher). The book under review covers a period from the 1870s, when the transformation of the «old police» began to be debated, until April 1942, when the Japanese imprisoned the European leadership of the corps. The «modern» colonial police force originated in reforms in 1897 and it was restructured, expanded and subjected to greater central control in the wake of major unrest shortly after the First World War. Both reforms receive ample attention, but in the book the theme of police organization is much less over-represented than it was in the series of volumes directed by Fijnaut. Police organization in the Indonesian context, moreover, was always intimately bound up with issues of race, ethnicity and colonialism. That the various police corps consisted in majority of locals but were led by whites (Dutchmen and a few other Europeans) comes as no surprise. The locals, however, were not ethnically homogeneous and men from one island or region were preferably recruited to police another. Christian natives from Ambon counted as very reliable constables.

The presence of a sizeable Chinese community, notably on the main island of Java, further complicated the pattern.

- 2 Bloembergen writes very well, without unnecessary jargon. There are only occasional oddities; line 4 of the conclusion of chapter 4, for example, manages to contain two anglicisms. Frequently used Indonesian terms are explained in a glossary, although the very frequent *rampok* (a type of robbery) is missing there. The author has wisely decided not to try to cover every police activity or part of the country during the period studied. In order to give body to her story, she alternates between more general, chronological chapters and thematic ones, in particular about sugar cane fires, Surabaya's police and the attempts to raise standards of physical and moral cleanliness. The sugar cane fires, rampant between about 1880 and 1920, resembled archaic protest in Hobsbawm's sense. Indeed, the modern nationalist organization *Sarekat Islam*, founded in 1912, condemned them. Most resulted from arson, although this was difficult to prove, and it was even more difficult to identify individual culprits. This fact sometimes resulted in policemen identifying the culprits arbitrarily and occasional collective punishments that were criticized in the Dutch parliament although only by a few social-democrats. The chapter about Surabaya is instructive too, if only because by 1920 it was a large, multi-ethnic city with over 200,000 inhabitants. My image of Indonesia has been colored for a long time by a story that a friend told me in my youth: his father got his driver's license there in the 1930s after just driving up and down the street, because there were few other cars. I don't know in which place that was, but Surabaya in the 1910s already had a busy traffic that required police regulation. The Chinese, agitated by their 1911 revolution, also kept the police busy.
- 3 The drive toward cleanliness included a wave of persecution of gay men in 1938-1939. This episode would be perfectly suited for a comparison with the well-known persecution of 1730 in The Netherlands. In both cases, for example, it was preceded by a period characterized by a lack of concern; in both cases accusations extended to men high up in the social hierarchy, most of whom were allowed to flee in 1730 while in the 1930s several Europeans were arrested and tried. These included a few police officials. Although no offense like sodomy existed then, homosexual activities involving an adult and a minor were legally forbidden and punishable for the former. The standard gay relationship involved a European middle-aged man who had one or more native male servants. The isle of Bali was viewed as a Mecca for Europeans, which reminds one of the bombing attack a few years ago committed by Islamic fundamentalists who considered the island's tourism as immoral though not necessarily in a homosexual sense. In the 1930s a German artist was said to drive around the island with his harem of native boys. In May 1940 this artist was arrested anew – a fate that he shared with his countrymen in the colony. Once more, these Germans included a few police officials, some of whom had worked for the corps since World War I, but who were now fired as unreliable.
- 4 Much more frequent in the book than the word cleanliness, however, are the words *beschaafd* (civilized) and *beschaving* (civilization). They recur seven times in the conclusion of chapter six, apart from its title «violence and civilization». The introduction of chapter eight has one paragraph in which the two related words appear seven times. Therefore, it is highly remarkable that Norbert Elias is absent from the bibliography. Generally, there is little theoretical reflection in the book. Bloembergen situates her story within the context of the historiography of colonial policing and

colonialism. The conclusion ends with two pages discussing Foucault, unsurprisingly concluding that his model is partially applicable and partially non-applicable to policing in the colonial state. What does «civilized,» in the absence of references to Elias, mean for the author? The answer is never explicitly given. Presumably, she means civilization in an -emic sense, as a we-ideal of the colonial elite. But whom among the elite is she referring to and to what extent did they want Indonesians to share this ideal? Most notoriously, throughout the book, colonial leaders wanted the Indonesian police to be civilized. That meant cleanliness and wearing shoes, but also refraining from excessive violence. If they were excessively violent nevertheless, they were chided for it by leftist commentators and are chided implicitly by the author. However, the effort to eradicate homosexuality in 1938-1939 is also analyzed in terms of a civilization campaign. In short, this is a missed chance. Elias and scholars working with his theory are often criticized for their alleged neglect of non-Western history or the supposed inapplicability of this theory to that part of the world. A thoughtful use of Elias' work could have made Bloembergen's study even better. It is still an interesting contribution to the emerging field of colonial policing.

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